SCHOOL COMPLETION AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: INFORMATION AND STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

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The problem of school dropout has been a national priority for some time, with good reason. The serious consequences of dropping out for students and for society are well documented. More recently, however, school completion has become important for schools and districts as well. The trend in education in recent years has been one of increased accountability, with a focus on student outcomes.

Although student achievement is the most common accountability indicator, dropout rates have also been used as a measure of school effectiveness and accountability. With the recent passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools and districts are now being held accountable for the completion rates of all students, including those that have not fared well in our educational system, students of color, special education students, and students who do not speak English as a first language.

The most important concept in preventing school dropout, or promoting completion, is that of *student engagement.* There is a great deal of evidence that dropping out of school is a process of disengagement from school and learning that occurs over many years, often beginning early in elementary school. Student engagement with school and learning has strong ties to dropout and school completion. Engagement is much more than the time students spend on task; rather, students' engagement with school and learning includes their *behavior* (e.g., attendance, participation), *cognition* (e.g., value of education, relevance to future, self-regulation), and *psychological/interpersonal experiences* (e.g., feeling that he or she belongs at school, relationships with teachers and peers).

Background

Students who drop out are later more likely to live in poverty, be dependent on welfare and other government assistance programs, have health problems, engage in criminal behavior and be incarcerated, and experience unemployment or underemployment. The costs to society in terms of lost tax revenue and government assistance programs for employment, housing, medical care, and incarceration are staggering. It is estimated that the group of students who drop out each year cost the United States $200 billion during their lifetimes in lost earnings and taxes, while the estimated annual cost of providing for them and their families is approximately $76 billion a year, or $800 per taxpayer.

Scope of the Problem

It is difficult to accurately report on the problem of non-completion or dropout. The definition of who is a dropout varies from study to study. For example, there are students who repeatedly drop in and drop out of school; others leave a school or district and it is unknown whether they are enrolled elsewhere; and other students leave traditional high schools and enroll in alternative programs. In addition, dropout and completion rates do not always match because some youth are in the process of completing an alternative credential, such as the GED.

Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education reported that, in October 2000, 10.9% of all 16–24 year olds in the United States were not enrolled in high school and had not earned an equivalency certificate, while 5 of every 100 who enrolled in high school in October 1999 left before October 2000, prior to graduation. Dropout rates vary by region of the country, district, and student characteristics.

Students at Risk for Dropping Out

There are several *status* predictors of non-completion of high school. Status variables are those that cannot be changed or are very difficult to change, such as race or ethnicity, parental education, and family income.

- *Race/ethnicity:* Students who are African American, Native American, or Hispanic have much lower school completion rates than white and Asian students.
- *Economic structure and/or resources:* Students who are from low-income families have much lower completion rates than those from average and high-income families. Also, students living in single-parent homes have lower completion rates.
- *Disability status:* Students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities, emotional/behavior disorders, or mild mental retardation, have much lower completion rates than their general education peers.
- *School type:* Urban schools typically have much lower completion rates.
- *Region:* Students are less likely to complete school if they live in the western or southern regions of the United States.
- *Home language:* Students who do not speak English as a first language are less likely to complete school.

In contrast, there are also predictors of non-completion at the student, family, and school levels that are *alterable,* or amenable to intervention.

Students. We know that students who are struggling academically, are frequently absent, and exhibit behavior problems at school are more likely to drop out, while students who complete homework, come to class prepared, and have high expectations for school completion are more likely to complete school. *The strongest predictor of non-completion at the student level is grade retention.* Students who have been retained are much more likely to drop out than other students. This evidence remains even when retained students are matched on demographic characteristics and achievement with other students who were promoted to the next grade.

Families. Families who provide academic support, such as helping with homework, volunteering at school, and motivational support for learning (e.g., high expectations for children, talking to children about school), and monitor their children's activities and whereabouts are more likely to have children that successfully complete school. On the other hand, permissive parenting, low educational expectations, and high mobility are associated with lower student completion rates.

Schools. Dropout and completion rates vary by school. For example, schools with orderly environments and committed, caring teachers, discipline policies that students perceive as being fair, and schools with high levels of school-wide attendance have lower dropout rates than other schools. In contrast, high student-teacher ratios, large schools (>1000 students), weak adult authority, few caring relationships between students and staff, poor and uninteresting curricula, low expectations for students, and high truancy are associated with greater dropout rates.

Promoting Successful Completion

It would seem that school completion and drop out are interchangeable terms, or just mirror images of one another; however, the term that one uses implies a different approach to the problem of students leaving school before graduation. An orientation of *preventing dropout* does not necessarily mean anything other than keeping students in school. On the other hand, *promoting successful school completion* implies that when students leave school, they have the academic and interpersonal skills necessary for success after high school.

Components of Effective Programs

Successfully promoting school completion will address student engagement and risk across systems—home, school, and community. What is important to recognize about promoting completion is that there is not one correct program or intervention. Each school, student population, and needs are different. Fortunately, studies have identified important components of school completion programs, such as:

- Providing opportunities for successful academic experiences and individual assistance
- Creating a positive interpersonal climate with opportunities for relationships to develop between students and teachers
- Structuring course work to be relevant to student's lives and future goals
- Providing help for serious personal problems
- Intervening early with students' academic and behavior problems

While the components and strategies utilized may vary from school to school, it is imperative that the effectiveness of school completion efforts is evaluated.

General Strategies

The important components of school completion interventions, along with the alterable variables associated with dropout, provide ideas and strategies that educators can use to positively affect completion. One of the most important activities is to *systematically monitor* students for the behavioral, academic, and psychological indicators of withdrawal from the schooling process—poor attendance and academic

performance, behavior problems, low participation in school activities (in the classroom and extracurricular), sense of belonging, isolation from peers, and insufficient credits earned toward graduation—and to *follow up* with students at risk of dropping out. Some activities might include incentives and support for attendance, timely academic and behavioral interventions for students who are struggling in these areas, community or school-based mentoring programs, and school-to-work partnerships. Other strategies and ideas for promoting student engagement can be carried out within classrooms and at the school and district levels.

Promoting Student Engagement Within Classrooms

Provide opportunities for extra help and more personal connections between teachers and students. Suggestions from students who have dropped out for improving schools and preventing other students from dropping out overwhelmingly indicate a desire for more access to teachers and additional help with schoolwork. Some possibilities include:

- Lowering student-teacher ratios whenever possible
- Creating smaller learning communities within schools to increase the interactions and connections among students and between students and teachers
- Providing opportunities for students to see teachers outside of the prescribed class period (during study hall for extra help or before and after school)
- Following up with students exhibiting signs of disengagement from school

Create opportunities for active participation and links to student interests. One suggestion from dropouts to increase the holding power of schools is to allow for more active student participation in class. The lecture is often the primary form of instruction, particularly in secondary schools. However, this mode of instructional delivery allows for very little active participation from students. Some options for increasing active student participation include:

- Peer tutoring
- Small, structured in-class discussion groups
- Small groups in which each student has an assigned role and contributes to the end-product (sometimes referred to as a *jigsaw,* like a puzzle in which each student has a piece)
- Hands-on activities or projects that illustrate or expand upon instructional content
- Building better connections between classroom content and the world outside of the classroom—to students' own career interests, the local community, or recent events
- Tapping into students' interests by providing choices of the ways that students may complete projects or assignments

Promoting School Engagement Within the School

Promote fair discipline policies. School-wide discipline policies that are publicized, fair, and applied to all students are associated with lower rates of dropout. It is also important to utilize alternatives to out-of-school suspension, which is a strong predictor of dropout.

Create a school-wide emphasis on the importance of staff and student attendance at school. Student and staff attendance are strong predictors of dropout and completion.

Implement policies to end grade retention at every school level. Developing alternatives to retention, such as mandatory summer school and extended day programs, and the early identification and intervention with academic and behavior problems, will go a long way toward reducing the number of students who do not complete school.

Provide post-dropout follow up and services. Most dropouts recognize the importance of education for employment and would consider returning to school if the opportunity arose. Some students who have not completed high school may be interested in an alternative high school program or would benefit from information on obtaining a GED. There has also been increased federal government interest in dropout re-entry, or recovery, programs. It is important that schools make a concerted effort to connect with dropouts and provide information regarding the available options.

Promoting School Engagement at the District or State Level

Provide alternative education options. Some students will not succeed in traditional schools and will leave school prior to completion, despite prevention efforts. It is important to provide students and parents with information about alternatives to the traditional school program. These programs may strengthen student engagement by being able to offer flexible hours, child care, work study opportunities, a high-focused thematic curriculum, a smaller environment, and/or more individualized attention. Alternative schools, charter schools, magnet schools, and the GED program are additional options for school completion.

Summary

The serious social consequences of not completing high school, increased vocational importance of high school and post-secondary education, and requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act reinforce the importance of successful school completion. Promoting successful

school completion requires a shift in focus from status predictors of non-completion, such as race and SES, to student engagement at school and with learning *over time.* Students who are engaged—academically, cognitively, psychologically, and behaviorally—are more likely to complete school. If we monitor student performance and engagement, follow up with students and families when warning signs of disengagement appear, and focus on successful school completion for all students, including those most at risk for school failure, we will positively influence the successful school completion of students in our schools.

Resources

Finn, J. D. (1989). Withdrawing from school. *Review of Educational Research, 59,* 117–142.

Christenson, S. L., Sinclair, M. F., Lehr, C., & Hurley, C. (2000). Promoting successful school completion. In K. M. Minke & G. G. Bear (Eds.), *Preventing school problems— Promoting school success: Strategies and programs that work* (pp. 211–257). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0932955894.

Rossi, R. J. (1994). *Schools and students at risk: Context and framework for positive change.* New York: Teachers College. ISBN: 0807733261.

Websites

Check and Connect School Engagement Program—*www.ici.umn.edu/checkandconnect*

National Dropout Center Prevention Center—*www.dropoutprevention.org*

Center for School-Based Youth Development, University of California, Santa Barbara—*www.education.ucsb.edu/C4SBYD*

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website ***www.nasponline.org*** and the NASP Center for Children & Families website ***www.naspcenter.org.*** Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. ***www.naspcenter.org/espanol/***

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. ***www.nasponline.org/store***

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit